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Biotechnology

Austrian Farmers Fear Biotech Crops Close to Border

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Report Highlights:

Austrian farmers fear cross-pollination from biotech corn planted in the Czech Republic close to the Austrian border. In 2006, Czech farmers planted 3,000 hectares (7,413 acres) of biotech corn, of which 10 percent is grown in the area around Znaim, which borders the Austrian province of Lower Austria. The Lower Austrian government and Lower Austrian farmer's organizations are negotiating with the Czech government to establish buffer zones between biotech plantings and the border. No one can predict the outcome of the negotiations at this time.

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Austrian Farmers Fear Biotech Crops in Czech Republic

According to an article of the Austrian daily newspaper "Kurier" on Monday, August 7, Austrian farmers fear cross-pollination from biotech corn planted in the Czech Republic that is close to the Austrian border. While in 2005, only 270 hectares (667 acres) of biotech corn were planted in the Czech Republic, in 2006 Czech farmers planted 3,000 hectares (7,413 acres), of which 10 percent are grown in the area around Znaim, which borders the Austrian province of Lower Austria. Next year more biotech crops are expected to be planted in the Czech Republic.

There is no mandatory registration of biotech plantings in the Czech Republic, so the exact locations of the biotech cornfields are unknown. However, lower Austrian farmers fear cross-pollination from Czech biotech crops with Austrian conventional crops. It is still an open issue who would be liable in a case of "contamination" of conventional crops with biotech pollen coming from a neighboring country.

Buffer areas consisting of biotech-free corridors (i.e. conventional crops) help solve contamination problems. The Lower Austrian government, the Lower Austrian farmer's initiative for a GM-free zone of "Waldviertel", and the Lower Austrian organic farmer's association are negotiating with the Czech government to establish buffer areas. Depending on the crop, different dimensions for the "biotech protection corridors" are being proposed on both sides of the Austrian-Czech border. The following distances are being suggested:

Biotech Protection Corridors Minimum Distances between Biotech Crops and the Border		
	Distance from Austria to Border	Distance from Czech Republic to Border
Corn	200 m (656 feet)	200 m (656 feet)
Beet	500 m (1,640 feet)	500 m (1,640 feet)
Rape	1,000 m (3,281 feet)	1,000 m (3,281 feet)

When and if the Czech government will agree to such a proposal cannot be predicted. Unlike Austria, the Czech population and Czech farmers are more open to biotech crops and products. Czech farmers see benefits in planting biotech crops, but it might become difficult to implement protection corridors of 2,000 m in total (6,562 feet) as is being proposed for rapeseed given the relatively small-scale production areas.